

February 2000

## Designing Librarians ... On the Web

Anna Belle Leiserson

*Vanderbilt University Law Library*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Leiserson, Anna Belle (2000) "Designing Librarians... On the Web," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 41.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3439>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

# Designing Librarians — On the Web

by Anna Belle Leiserson (Vanderbilt University Law Library)

Welcome to a new column on designing for the Web — a skill that's increasingly useful to all of us — librarians, publishers and vendors alike. Learning how to set up a Web page is a breakthrough; honing your skill becomes, in time, an art. My hope is to pass some of the pleasure I get from doing Web design on to you.

I must also confess to a secret agenda. After looking at thousands (no exaggeration) of publisher Web sites, I have some, um, constructive criticism to offer. I can't tell you how many grindingly huge graphics, cranky search engines, bogus internal links, seriously out-of-date pages, and just plain confusing sites I've seen in the past few years. One can only wonder why some publishers put sites on the Web at all.

Then there are library sites. While as a general rule they are more reliable and navigable than publisher sites, they do tend towards the dull. Our entrances and reading rooms are as a rule attractive, so why not our home pages? More and more, Web pages, not front doors, are the main entrance to our world. By the same token, there are a significant number of absolutely fabulous publisher and library sites, and my plan is to regularly highlight one or two of these in the Thumbs Up section of the column.

In future issues we can discuss the nitty-gritty of mark-up, getting graphics, managing Web sites and more. For this first column let's start with the basics: how does one design a good site? While it's possible to write several books about this, there's a straightforward procedure which for a simple site should be a good enough to start with.

**1** Be clear on your primary audiences and what they need most from your site. Are they patrons, staff, librarians, vendors? Do they want price information, maps, policies, news? If you're not sure of the answers to these questions, that's fine. Many people who know they need a new or better Web site aren't clear on these most basic issues initially. The trick is to find potential users and then pick their brains — briefly. Since I design for a law school, my favorite ploy is to ask a few students. One doesn't have to go into full-blown questionnaire mode to get tons of useful feedback.

**2** Next it's time to map out the structure of the site. I usually do this on paper, rather like a quick blueprint. A general rule of thumb is to confine the main menu to eight very succinct terms. To find out more on how to do this, see *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*, by Louis Rosenfeld and Peter Morville (O'Reilly & Associates, 1998) — not only the definitive book on the topic, but also written by two librarians.

**3** Then come up with a look. I think this is the most difficult part for librarians. For a good-sized company or library, it's worth hiring a professional graphic designer. But for those who can't afford a pro or like doing this kind of thing, go for it. There are a few simple principles:

Place menus at the top or left, where users tend to look for them.

If you have a logo, lucky you. Use it, though be prepared to adapt it. Keep graphics small.

Avoid free clipart Web sites. Most are a waste of time, not to mention that many have illegal copyrighted images. It's better to use photos or clipart that costs a little.

Use the 256 Web-safe colors. (If this means nothing to you, see books by Lynda Weinman, such as *Coloring Web Graphics*).

Avoid light print against dark backgrounds. Most users can't print pale letters correctly.

When in doubt, err on the simple side.

I do this stage entirely in Photoshop, tinkering with the shapes, color, white space, etc., and only later work with HTML. You can do it on paper too.

**4** Combine your text and the graphics you've developed above (if any) in Web form. The scary way to say this is "do the HTML markup." I expect at least one or two of you are going to say, "I can't possibly do that." Actually these days this is a bit like saying, "I can't word process." There are a growing number of decent WYSIWYG Web editors which put the actual HTML code in the background. **Microsoft FrontPage** generally gets the best reviews in this category. Be forewarned, however, that not all Web servers can handle "FrontPage Extensions." Just be cautious about relatively high-end features of FrontPage, in particular forms and database-to-Web models. For free Web authoring, you can always use **Netscape Composer**, though it does trash code and has a number of other peculiarities. **Evrsoft's** 1st Page 2000 <<http://www.evrsoft.com/>> is also free. I've just started using it, and so far am very impressed. However, it's code-based, not WYSIWYG. In other words, you will need to learn some HTML. My opinion is this is still the best way to go. Basic HTML just isn't that hard and there are any number of good books on the subject (e.g. **Jennifer Niederst's** *Web Design in a Nutshell*; O'Reilly & Associates, 1999).

**5** Finally, test and talk to potential users at each of the stages above. It improves the site and saves heartache, not to mention extra work, in the long run.

continued on page 82

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>

**Caltech Library System**

CLAS SCISearch Ibid Help Search CLSweb  
Caltech Main

**Caltech Library System**  
Mail Code 1-32  
Pasadena, CA 91125  
[Directions](#)  
Voice 626-395-6405  
Fax 626-792-7540  
Ariel 131.215.225.178  
[library@caltech.edu](mailto:library@caltech.edu)

**WHAT'S NEW DETAILS**

- SCISearch to become Web of Science, Monday, 1/17
- Register for Information Tools class 1/18
- Attend Quick Review of Info Resources 1/14
- 1999 Tax forms now available

**General & Subject Specific Reference**

<b>LOCATE BOOKS</b>	<b>LOCATE JOURNAL ARTICLES</b>
<a href="#">Library Catalog - CLAS</a>	<a href="#">CompendexWeb</a>
<a href="#">Book &amp; Journal title catalog</a>	<a href="#">FirstSearch</a>
<a href="#">Books In Print</a>	<a href="#">GeoRef</a>

[About the Library](#)  
[Hours](#)  
[Personnel Directory](#)  
[Library Services](#)  
[Library Publications](#)  
[Room Reservations](#)  
[Library Classes](#)



## Designing Librarians on the Web from page 81

One great strategy is to start by designing a page for yourself — a true home page. Heaven knows you're well acquainted with your audience. Whatever you do, don't be intimidated. Just let it rip.

### Thumbs Up!

#### A Great Library Web Site

The home page of the **Caltech Library System** <<http://library.caltech.edu/>> is clean but colorful, with easy-to-read fonts and attractive small graphics, a clear easy-on-the-eye (though not boring) layout, and a elegant faint background that doesn't interfere with either reading or printing the page. It also has a few news items and links to trial subscriptions at the top — a great location for such items.

When I say library sites tend to the "dull," I don't mean to suggest we go overboard with animated graphics, day-glow colors, etc. Heaven forbid. Better dull than garish. They just need some polish — like this lovely site.

#### Fun Site

**TipWorld** <<http://www.tipworld.com/>> emails daily helpful hints. It's particularly good on software (e.g. **Windows 98** and **Microsoft Office 97**), but also covers subjects ranging from book reviews and litera-

ture trivia to car care and better sleeping. One caveat: the advertising in the daily email is a bit thick.

#### Web Book

**Designing Web Usability** by Jakob Nielsen (New Riders Publishing, 2000) ISBN: 156205810X \$45.00

Currently number one on Amazon's computer bestseller list, **Designing Web Usability** is a must-read for anyone serious about Web work. Nielsen is widely hailed as the expert in this field, and his book lives up to that reputation. You can see his weekly columns at his own Web site: <<http://www.useit.com/>>. Ironically the page itself is no visual tour de force, though of course it is quite usable. It's obvious he favors function over form. However his suggestions are astonishingly sensible and thought-provoking. Also, they are backed by hard data (e.g. typing and counting pixels of screen real estate), many helpful examples, and clear illustrations. 🐘

## REMEMBER WHEN?

Subscription Agencies were *service* businesses and your account was as important as any other account your agency handled?

**Basch Subscriptions, Inc.** provides serial *service* that saves you and your library both time and money. Any agency will take your order, only **Basch Subscriptions, Inc.** will prove its commitment every day with the personal service you deserve.



Services for Libraries and Publishers

**Basch Subscriptions, Inc.**

88 N. Main Street  
Concord, NH 03301

Phone: (603) 229-0662

Fax: (603) 226-9443

E-Mail: [Subs@Basch.com](mailto:Subs@Basch.com)



## Why Do We Still Buy Books?

by David H. Stam (University Librarian Emeritus, Syracuse University)

*The following paper was delivered as the keynote address at the 19th Annual Charleston Conference and is presented here much as it was presented with minimal editing and a few sources added.*

**David H. Stam** is University Librarian Emeritus at **Syracuse University** and is currently editing an **International Dictionary of Library Histories** to be published by **Fitzroy Dearborn** in 2001.

My first reaction to **Rosann Bazirjian's** invitation to speak at this conference was the typical victim's re-

sponse of "Why Me?" I was already happily retired, engaged in several other projects, unconcerned about tenure or promotion, devoid of ambition, tired of travel, and eager to enjoy whatever leisure my preoccupations allowed, including reading. But I was and am concerned about books and I could only assume that Rosann and the program committee were looking for the oldest and grayest defender of that outmoded commodity whom they could find; I had to admit that I fit the profile in every respect and I accepted the invitation.

But I expect some empathy for a tough assignment. The topic seems a lonely one on this program—even though the Conference title is "Issues

in Book and Serial Acquisition," I have looked in vain for any other title among the fifty odd papers of these three days which even mentions the word, apart from e-books. My wife charitably suggested that you acquisitions librarians have the book business so well mastered that you have to turn to new and knottier problems for your electronic survival. Another difficulty is in trying to balance the onslaughts of the doomsayers of the book against the sentimental claptrap of its defenders. We've heard so often for so many years that "you can't curl up in bed with a computer" that it becomes a challenge to try. Just yesterday I heard a variant new to me and a refreshing change: "you can't take a computer to the bath-

*continued on page 82*